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Living with bears

by Sarah Locke

Most people vividly remember even brief glimpses of grizzly bears; closer encounters with these powerful mammals are usually seared into our memories. While most of us are happy to observe grizzlies at a safe distance, within a year or so, a few lucky people will have the chance to watch them at very close quarters in the northern Yukon.

Small groups of visitors able and willing to pay the price will be taken on guided tours into Fishing Branch Ni'iinlii'njik Park, where they almost certainly will have the chance to watch grizzly bears fishing for chum salmon. A few spaces also will be allotted to Yukoners through a lottery system.

A grizzly bear-viewing program is planned for Fishing Branch Ni'iinlii'njik Park in the northern Yukon.
(photo: Government of Yukon)

Ni'iinlii'njik means "where fish spawn," and in the fall large numbers of bears gather along this river to feed on the Yukon's most northerly run of chum salmon. The park was established in 1999 through the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation Final Agreement and the Yukon Protected Areas Strategy.

To ensure that the bears remain wild and are not unnecessarily disturbed, and that visitors' safety is assured, only small guided groups will be allowed to visit this remote area. It will be a carefully controlled operation, similar to ones in Alaska at places like the McNeil River.

"I think Fishing Branch has a lot of promise as a viewing area," says Phil Timpany, a northern bear expert who will be managing the bear-viewing operation, which is being run in partnership with the Vuntut Development Corporation. The long term plan is for the Vuntut Gwich'in to run the program themselves.

Timpany first visited the area in 1991, and is now spending time there habituating the bears, meaning getting them used to human presence. Habituating bears does not mean taming them; instead it depends on "finding the right equation for maximizing viewing and minimizing disturbance," he says. While many people might

consider this a risky undertaking, Timpany says it is just a matter of getting to know the bears and their individual personalities.

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"You always deal with individual bears," he says, adding that some bears never do habituate. "One of the most important and critical things is that you never let people determine the distance. You let the bears decide the distance."

Timpany's opinion that a bear-viewing operation can be conducted safely in Fishing Branch is based on almost 30 years of experience working with grizzly bears in the Taku River watershed in northwestern British Columbia. When he was hired to work on a salmon research project there, he was supposed to be the bear expert in the group. But nothing in his previous experience had prepared him for managing gangs of grizzlies.

"I was really just a young and stupid lad," he said, adding that he did not even know what bear habituation meant at that time. "I was just a hunting guide. I used to kill bears."

The researchers had built a weir across the river to collect salmon, and large numbers of bears began congregating there for the same purpose. The first summer the researchers just tried to work around the bears, staying out of their way as best as they could. But at times as many as nine or ten bears would be fishing along the weir, and it was difficult for the researchers to get their work done.

The next summer they tried to get the bears to leave. Bear spray had not been invented yet, so they shot the animals with rubber bullets and fired bear bangers at them. These measures kept the bears away during the day, but they would come back at night and wreak havoc, tearing the weir apart and squabbling with each other.

"We turned the bears into enemies," says Timpany. "And that can make them really defensive and they hold grudges. So when we did encounter them, we were having high risk encounters."

The third summer they were close to shutting the project down because of safety concerns, but not before they tried one last strategy "We decided to see if we could get along with them. Bears are highly intelligent, and so we looked at how their hierarchy worked."

They took their cues from the bears themselves, watching closely to see how the bears interacted with each other. "Bears do not alter their behaviour with human beings. They use the same behaviour with us as with other bears."

They noticed that the bears "were respectful of authority" and set out to assert their dominance over the grizzly bears at the weir. They threw rocks at them. They sprayed water at them. Sometimes, if the bears were damaging the weir, the researchers smashed them with two-by-fours.

It did not take long for the bears to get the message: in the social hierarchy of humans and bears at the weir, the humans were at the top. As long as everyone played by their rules, everyone got along.

"The bears can do whatever they want as long as they don't bother us, our work or our equipment," he says.

The salmon research is still underway at the weir, and some of the bears feeding there now are third generation descendants of the bears with which Timpany first worked. Now the researchers can work side-by-side with bears they know, and the habituated grizzlies even act as "watchdogs," alerting them when unfamiliar bears enter the scene.

Working in partnership with the Taku River Tlingit First Nation, Timpany has begun taking some tourists to watch the grizzlies feeding along the weir. As a passionate defender of bears, he thinks that these sorts of viewing opportunities are an effective way to show the value of protecting both bears and their habitat.

With no weir to defend or work to accomplish, the situation along the Fishing Branch is a bit different, but the success of a bear-viewing program there still hinges on getting to know the individual bears. While bear experts often identify mother grizzlies as the most dangerous bears, Timpany finds that they can be the easier animals to work with as they are lower in the bears' social hierarchy. Also, if he can get some of the mothers used to the presence of humans, their cubs will follow suit.

Even after decades of working with grizzlies he says that he is still humbled and awed by their presence, and looks forward to showing visitors that humans can get along with these animals -- as long as everyone observes the rules.

For more information on Fishing Branch Ni'iinlii'njik Park, contact the Yukon Parks Department at (867) 667-5648. Phil Timpany can be contacted at wildeye@direcway.com.

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